

Athlete Profile (National)

Bonnie Sampsell: Cheering on the Game!

Bonnie Sampsell's favorite wheelchair sports are power soccer and bowling. Unfortunately, she can't participate in either one at the 2008 National Veterans Wheelchair Games, taking place in Omaha, Nebraska, July 25-29, 2008.

After years of competing and placing in those events, she has doctor's orders to change her Games activities, at least for this year. "I broke my back," explained Sampsell, a paraplegic from a previous service-related injury. "My old wheelchair just threw me right out of it."

Sampsell's original injury is the result of heavy lifting as a supply sergeant. Her spine experienced compression and narrowing, leaving her injured for life. Now, she is recovering from her wild ride and the spill she took from her wheelchair, and is grateful for a new, more cooperative set of wheels.

A long time competitor at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games, Sampsell will compete this time in the Powerchair 200 (a track event for motorized wheelchair users), archery, table tennis, a motorized wheelchair rally and wheelchair slalom. Although she won't be involved with her usual sports, she would much rather delve into some different ones than miss the Games altogether.

"I just love coming to the Wheelchair Games," she said. "I enjoy the challenge of competing and I like to coach and cheer on the new players. I'll miss bowling, though." Sampsell earned a gold medal for bowling in last year's Games, along with two other gold and two silver medals. "Bowling is a challenging sport. It takes a lot of hand-eye coordination to get that ball where it needs to go." She anticipates that the slalom will be her favorite this time around, a difficult obstacle course that tests the athlete's skill and speed.

Sampsell, 56 and a Vietnam veteran from 1970-75, knows plenty about mentoring others. She inspired her daughter to follow suit and join the Army. Her daughter is now on her second tour of duty in Iraq. "I always said, 'If you want to travel, see the world, learn new things — enlist in the military.' I would recommend it to anyone. I enjoy being a woman veteran."

Sampsell, who lives in Jersey Shore, Pa., has attended the National Veterans Wheelchair Games nine previous times. Although this time will be a little different for her, she looks forward to being with her fellow veterans in the spirit of camaraderie and competition. "To all you veterans out there in wheelchairs — give the Games a try! You just might like them," she said, ready to cheer on anyone else willing to try something new.

